

Rabies Prevention

Rabies is a disease caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system. It is transmitted in saliva through the bite of an infected animal. Rabies causes severe inflammation in the brain and spinal cord and is fatal. All mammals are susceptible to rabies, including humans.



Rabies in Colorado

In Colorado and throughout the United States, many different wild animal species can carry rabies. Skunks and bats are the most significant sources of rabies in Colorado, but other wild animals can also be infected. Domestic animals, such as dogs, cats, horses and livestock, can become infected with rabies through contact with wild animals. Small rodents and rabbits do not usually carry rabies.

Rabies is becoming more common in wildlife along Colorado's Front Range, placing both humans and animals at risk for this deadly disease.

Rabid animals usually show abnormal behavior, such as aggression, confusion or lack of fear of people.

Contact with infected wild or domestic animals places you and your family at risk for rabies infection. Immediate medical treatment is required if a person or domestic animal is exposed to rabies.

Rabies in humans is 100 percent preventable through prompt and appropriate medical care. Your health provider, possibly in consultation with your state or local health department, will decide if you need the rabies vaccination series.

Get the facts

- Half of the people who die from rabies are under the age of 15.
- Rabies attacks the brain and spinal cord. If it is not prevented, it will cause death.
- In the United States, rabies has been reported in every state except Hawaii.
- Rabies gets its name from a Latin word that means "to rage" because animals with rabies sometimes act as if they are angry.
- Any mammal can get rabies. It can only be passed to another animal or a person through saliva. You cannot get rabies from blood.
- Animals with rabies may act differently. It's always best to stay away from wild animals and to be careful with other people's pets.
- Improvements in animal control, animal vaccination programs and treatment with timely, post-exposure rabies vaccine have reduced the number of human deaths from rabies in the U.S. to two to three per year since 1990.
- Protecting your pet with appropriate rabies vaccination(s) protects you. Check with your veterinarian for the proper schedule.

What should I do if I am bitten by an animal?

- Clean and wash the wound for at least 5 minutes with soap and water.
- All animal bites should be evaluated by a physician immediately. After seeking medical attention, contact your local public health department for guidance on rabies risk, next steps and to make a report. Antibiotics, a rabies vaccine and a tetanus booster might be needed. Treatment for rabies should begin as soon as possible to avoid death.

How can I reduce the risk of getting rabies?

- Do not feed or interact with wild animals. Wildlife may be carrying the rabies virus and by getting close to them you risk becoming infected through bites and scratches.
- Vaccinate your pets (dogs and cats) to protect them from the rabies virus. If you've already vaccinated your pets, make sure their vaccinations are up-to-date.
- Keep pets indoors to limit their contact with wild animals. Do not feed pets outside.

Who do I contact about rabid animals?

- If you or a family member has been in physical contact (even if it didn't bite you) with an animal that could have rabies, seek medical attention immediately and contact your local public health department. If you live in Denver County, call 311 or call Denver Public Health at (303) 602-3614.
- If you see an animal, especially a wild animal, that is staggering, disoriented, overly aggressive without being provoked or acting in ways that seem unusual, contact Denver Animal Protection by calling 720-713-1311.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control & Prevention; Tri-County Health Department; Denver Public Health, Denver Environmental Health

This fact sheet was updated on 6/7/16

